



## Stay or Follow?

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
Sunday, April 27, 2008*

*John 14:15-21:*

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

From the moment he mentioned it they just couldn't bear it. What do you mean you are going to die and be raised up? This makes no sense. And underneath it all, in the wake of Jesus' prediction of his death and despite his assurance that they will not be left alone, what do you mean you are going to leave us? How could you do that to us—after all we have been through you are simply going to leave? What will happen to us? How will we go on? What are we supposed to do when you are gone?

I can really relate to the disciples anxiety—to their fear of being abandoned. It seems to be an unfortunate part of the human experience—we want to hang onto what we have—whether what we possess is material or a relationship or a human being. We sometimes want to fix things in amber-freeze them for eternity so we can hang onto them and there is no risk of us being left orphaned. Like the disciples immediately after the resurrection, we want to hang onto Jesus' feet—not let him go. We like the idea of having a God we can see and touch—a God in the flesh and so we with the disciples begin the cry to “Stay, stay with us Jesus. Stay.” And Jesus, as Barbara Brown Taylor\* writes, looks over his shoulder at us as he disappears into the crowd and calls back “Follow.”

There are a myriad of responses to being left orphaned. One is to fix our gaze backwards—remembering and re-remembering our loved one. Hanging onto what was. As in the musical *Camelot's* last scene where King Arthur sings a song filled with memories of what had been the most idyllic place on earth. He begs the audience to remember that “once there was a spot for one brief, shining moment that was known as Camelot.” Arthur's call is to tell the story over and over again and perhaps in the retelling it just might, for one brief moment, come true again.

We may be tempted, in our efforts to resist feeling abandoned, to remember the Jesus story as another telling of *Camelot*. If we just tell the story often enough, to ourselves and to others, maybe we can ward off despair. Maybe we can just keep telling the story over and over again until Jesus comes back and cleans everything up for us, scoops us up in his arms and reassures us that he is with us and now that he is back everything will be all right. And so we keep singing the chorus to *Camelot*—trying desperately to remember every detail of Jesus' life and continuing our plea “Jesus stay.” And Jesus looks over his shoulder as he wanders off into the crowd and calls “Follow.”

Follow? Follow you where? And could you slow down a bit, I can't keep up—I'm losing you in the crowd. You can't disappear yet, I still want to hang out with you, serve you. I know you told us to love one another and we would be fine, but I still have a lot of questions about that. Stay and tell me what you mean, tell me the rules, tell me what to do. Jesus calls back; “I will leave you with something much better than a rule book: I will not just leave you alone but I will pray the Father who will send you a comforter, an advocate, the Spirit of truth.” And we reply, well thanks, but a rule book would be much easier and clearer.”

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\*Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Mixed Blessings*, Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland, 1986, p. 65.

In some ways it seems it would be so much easier if we just had a blueprint, a script for life—a sort of “Jesus’ memory rule book” we could follow and all would be well. Some have tried to read the Bible that way, and while the Bible is indeed a treasure, it simply is not a prescription for life—Jesus certainly did not address every single subject we have to wrestle with.

As Barbara Lundblad<sup>†</sup> writes, “a little later in John’s Gospel, Jesus says ‘The Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of all that I have said to you.’” That is, Jesus was saying: You don’t know everything yet. You have more to learn. In every generation you will be faced with new questions and perplexities. Does the sun revolve around the earth or is it the other way around? Should nuclear weapons ever be used against an enemy? Is welfare the best way to bear one another’s burdens? Should women who feel called by God be ordained to preach? Jesus knew there were some questions the sacred writings didn’t address. Jesus also acknowledged that there were some things he had never talked about. “The Spirit will be your tutor,” he said, “guiding you into all the truth. You have my love through which you are to love one another and you have the Spirit.”

So Jesus leaves us with the Spirit and with a charge—if you love me you will keep my commandments. What Jesus is commanding us here is not to blindly follow a set of rules, but rather that we “obey” his commandment to love one another; “obey” as it comes from its Latin roots meaning to turn an ear towards. If you love me, keep an ear turned towards me always. Pattern your life on mine. This is not a conditional “only if you do this, that and the other will I love you,” rather it is a way of “catching” the Spirit—a statement that God’s indwelling Spirit becomes operational in us when we allow it to—when we dwell in that divine relationship. Abide in me—literally dwell in the Spirit of love and truth. Let it infuse and inform your life—let it shape your life so that it is lived in an outward stance to the world, always looking beyond self. Abide in me—join me in this threefold dance of relationship called the Trinity. Dwell in my love, my truth, and I will indeed be as present to you as your next breath. Follow me on this unscripted adventure that is life. And we find the more we follow Jesus’ pattern, the more we live in love the more operational the Spirit is in each of us. And the more the Spirit is operational in each of us, the more we live in love. This is a circular and mutual relationship, much as is the very nature of God, the Trinity.

Alice Craft-Kerney of All Soul’s Church is a hero to many in a neighborhood devastated by the effects of Hurricane Katrina. Not far from the breach in the Industrial Canal that doomed her neighborhood, the Lower 9th ward, Craft-Kerney founded a health clinic two years ago. A registered nurse at Charity Hospital before the storm, Craft-Kerney felt God calling her to do something for the neighborhood that seemed to many to have been left behind in the rebuilding of the city. So Alice did what she knew best: she took care of people for whom health insurance and regular medical care is but a dream. Alice told my friend the Rev. Scott Albergate of the Diocese of Louisiana, “didn’t know who you Episcopalians were before the storm but I sure know who you are now. Lots of people came to the Lower 9 after the storm, but now most of them are gone. You stayed.”

Alice remembers the daily presence of a mobile unit supplied by the Diocese’s Office of Disaster Response, and the many church groups from across America that spent day after day on the corner of St. Claude and Caffin Avenues in the parking lot of a former Walgreen’s store, offering water, food and clothing. She recalls the constant presence of Episcopal clergy giving comfort to returning residents trying to rebuild their lives.

Today, that Walgreen’s is the home of the Diocese’s newest mission station, the Church of All Souls. Most of All Souls’ congregants were not Episcopalians before the storm, but the unflagging presence of the Diocese has captured their hearts. And a vision for the mission of All Souls is coming into focus. Far from a traditional model of church, the people conceive of All Souls as a center for community life that will offer nourishment for the soul and healing to a broken community. On the drawing board now are plans to have All Souls’ house a daycare center, community meeting space, an office for social and legal services and the first-ever remote visitation center for families of persons incarcerated at Angola Prison, using computer and satellite technology.

The people of All Souls have been intentional about discerning the Spirit’s leading, discerning how they are to be the hands of Jesus in their community at this time, especially as they listen to the voices of All Souls’ neighbors. It is their needs and their dreams for a renewed way of life that shape their planning.

So buoyed and accompanied by the Spirit we plow into the crowd after Jesus. And little by little we begin to stop endlessly singing the refrain from *Camelot*—forget the specifics of his face, forget the small details that seemed so important. Because as we study each face we see in the crowd, the memory becomes a little fuzzier—the face of Jesus blends and merges into the faces of each person we see. Until we so dwell in the Spirit that we can no longer distinguish the face of Jesus from the face of another. Almost as if in attempting to stay with him, to serve him, we begin unconsciously to let the Spirit guide us, and we begin to serve others, to see Jesus in them. Almost as if he has not really left us alone. Almost as if he had actually wanted it this way.

<sup>†</sup>Lundblad, Barbara, “I will not leave you orphaned,” Day 1, April 30, 2005.